

POLICY BRIEF

Mobile Creches

In its current strategic curve, Mobile Creches is trying to harness the knowledge about young child issues – gained from decades of engagement with parent communities, businesses, practitioners, advocates, programme implementers and policy makers – in the form of a biennial Report on the State of the Young Child in India. The **State of the Young Child in India** (SOYC) Report is the first such major knowledge product in this direction. Taking a step further, the Report is complemented by a series of policy briefs, drawn from the Report's findings, with an intention to reach policy makers and other relevant stakeholders who are in a position to influence changes on behalf of the young child in India.

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Policy Brief 05

Strengthening the evidence-base on the young child: Bridge data gaps for better designed interventions and monitoring

Brief Summary

As the State of the Young Child in India Report has noted, early childhood is a critical phase to ensure lifelong development of an individual and also one marked by the intersection of multiple vulnerabilities and deprivations. For an accurate depiction of their situational realities and to initiate and invest into actionable programmes, it is important for timely and credible data to be available. However, the assessment of the state of the young child in India shows that such data is severely lacking which hampers quality assessment, monitoring and interventions in the sector. Therefore, it is recommended that data gaps be bridged through the

collection of reliable, timely data across all indicators and evidence-based interventions be made to address issues of neglect, vulnerability, deprivation, discrimination, violence, to improve the child ecosystem.

Introduction

As a knowledge organisation, Mobile Creches' report State of the Young Child in India draws upon its decades of working with young children and their families and its engagement with local communities, frontline workers, businesses, practitioners, advocates and policymakers. In building on this grassroots work in early childhood development, the SOYC Report has

constructed two young child indices that aggregate selected indicators to separately track child outcomes and child circumstances and rank Indian states on the basis of their performance across various dimensions of child well-being. However, the exercise has brought forth serious data gaps that act as an obstacle to the assessment of, and interventions into, child development. One of the major recommendations to emerge from the SOYC Report is the collection and public availability of credible, disaggregated data along various dimensions of the young child well-being so as to allow for the availability of evidence-basis for policy and programme interventions.

The Report provides an insightful analysis into the varied needs of children under six years in India, ranging from survival, health, nutrition, and growth, to stimulation, safety and protection, care, and a dignified life. It has also highlighted the multiplicity of challenges and vulnerabilities that the young child faces, as well as the interlinked issues of the mother, parents, childcare workers, societal inequities and inequalities and the centrality of the role of the State in ensuring the rights and entitlements for safe and healthy childhood. However, assessment has been limited owing to challenges of data availability, especially for marginalized children who are almost rendered invisible, and hence monitoring and intervention is severely hampered.

This Policy Brief maps some of the serious gaps in data availability across the different dimensions of the young child well-being, reflected in an incomplete assessment of the realities of child circumstances, as well as child development outcomes. It recognizes that

data gaps make it hard to track and monitor progress, and make strategic and operational adjustments to policies and programmes. Data deficits become obstacles in tracking and reporting progress towards national objectives. They also come in the way of monitoring India's progress towards internationally agreed development commitments like the Sustainable Development Goals.

Based on available data on key indicators, the Report presents a methodology that aggregates key indicators, separately for child outcomes and child circumstances, constructing two corresponding indices. Such indices can facilitate a comparison of variations across states in India, as well as track progress over time. It emphasizes the criticality of timely, credible, disaggregated data, district-level upwards, available in the public domain for reliable assessments, monitoring and evidence-based interventions.

Data availability is the key to improving child outcomes

The available data on child well-being in India, especially the indicators collated by the National Family Health Surveys (NFHS 4) provide a dismal picture. Although India has witnessed significant decline in the Infant Mortality Rate in the last two decades, it has the highest number of neonatal, infant and under-5 deaths in the world. Further, averages often conceal significant intra and inter-state differentials in these indicators. Mostly the data that is available is about the physical well-being aspect. For these reasons, not only is an overall assessment prevented but required interventions are also not initiated, as there is a lack of data to paint a proper picture.

This situation is reflective of an environment where the outcomes of varied laws and policies are not in line with the actual commitments and the commitments themselves are not enough to address multiple issues. Data could be used as a key to improving child outcomes as it allows for informed choices for policy, programmatic interventions and budgetary allocations. It can be used as an effective tool to promote inclusive growth by enabling effective design, monitoring and evaluation, and corrective interventions, where the need be.

Varied categories within the young child including gendered, caste, class, location, socio-economic status, religion-based, disabled, marginalized, in single-headed households, those living in conflict areas, facing natural calamities, living in slums, in institutions, on streets, without adult caregivers, children of migrants, those subjected to violence, need specific interventions aligned to their particular needs.ⁱ For this to happen, data that is timely, credible and disaggregated along these categories can be a potent tool not only to highlight specific deprivations, and vulnerabilities, but also to allow for determining and implementing effective programmes and schemes to address the particular needs.

Often, data combines the category of the young child with that of overall children under 18 years of age, leaving them invisible. Setting up a knowledge base that centres the young child in research and documentation, both through qualitative and quantitative methods, can help framing of indicator-based assessments of the condition of the young child in India to

measure problem-intensity and variations and inform specific interventions for them at the national, state and local levels. Informed and intelligent use of real-time data forms the fulcrum for informed policymaking and implementation.

Mapping the Data Gaps

A major obstacle during the analysis undertaken in the State of the Young Child in India Report has been with regarding to the construction of Young Child Outcomes Index (YCOI) and Young Child Environment Index (YCEI) to capture state rankings and variations in performance along outcome indicators and policy enablers that impact the overall well-being of the young child.ⁱⁱ The YCOI exercise was constrained, as there was no appropriate measure to capture activity-based learning at the anganwadi and pre-primary school for measuring cognitive development in the under-sixes age group. For YCEI, the indicator of child safety, while important, had to be dropped owing to concerns of lack of credible data, for the National Crime Records Bureau data showed anomalies resulting from the lack of registration and reporting of cases from various states. It highlights the need for better reporting for child safety, which is a precondition for and an ingredient of child development. There are mostly anecdotal accounts of violence against the young child and no empirical studies that could enable a systematic response for prevention strategies to be implemented for young child care and protection.

The indexing exercise has also highlighted that data deficit exists in terms of ECCE provisions as well making it impossible to have an accurate assessment of the

provisions under ECCE across India. The Anganwadi Workers (AWWs) have the tendency to report higher numbers than the actual number of children who the services cater to, as their performance assessment is based on it. Data deficit has resulted in undermining planning, monitoring, and evaluation processes that could otherwise enable focused interventions from the governments and help in service delivery.

Data on various specifically marginalized categories of children under six, including the disabled, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, children on streets and in slums, those in conflict areas, children of sex workers, transgender children, is insufficient or almost non-existent to address their specific needs and vulnerabilities.

Although ICDS generates voluminous data on a monthly basis, it has not been used for planning, policy making or estimation of the required human and financial resources. Its Monthly Progress Reports sent by the states to the Ministry of Women and Child Development are neither made available in the public domain nor is there any evidence of such data put to use to reach the most marginalized.

Further, budget allocation and expenditures incurred by states on specific child-centered programmes are not available (and/or accessible) in public domain. Such a deficit hampers planning, monitoring and evaluation exercises considerably. As chapter 6 of the SOYC Report analyzing fiscal allocations notes, the Report had to primarily rely on national level data including budgets of various ministries and allocations to states as state and district level data on multiple

dimensions and the money spent on varied needs of children are not available in the public domain. In such cases, there are chances of over and under estimation in calculating the expenditure

Policy Recommendations

- Reliable, disaggregated data along multiple indicators must be collected on young children to enable a due assessment of their situation and enable evidence-based policy and programme interventions. Central and state governments need to invest in improving the quality of data generation systems and place them in the public domain. This will enable other stakeholders to help strategise and plan alongside the State in improving the young child development outcomes. Monitoring can be improved and remedial measures facilitated by enabling an online data system using technological inputs for service improvement and interventions.
- State governments need to use data on the health and nutrition status, and other well-being indicators of mothers and children as a powerful monitoring tool to identify geographical areas as well as specific disadvantaged groups where concerted action is required. Such data can also enable technical expertise from researchers and other experts on the varied aspects.
- Performance assessment of teachers, AWWs and other government functionaries should be divorced from the numbers reported by them; otherwise such reporting results in a gross estimation of participation rates and school enrollment causing multiple obstacles in assessment and

planning.

- NSSO and NFHS must improve the frequency and extend their sampling surveys to cover critical child development indicators. NFHS must capture malnutrition by grade, while NSSO must extend its sampling surveys to include net attendance at the pre-primary/anganwadi levels, so as to enable effective interventions. These exercises must use consistent methodology and the data must be made available in the public domain so as to enable policy correction as well as monitoring and documentation of successful interventions.

Endnotes

ⁱ For more on this, see Chapter 4: Prioritising the Disadvantaged Child, State of the Young Child in India, 2020, Mobile Creches. The chapter discusses in detail these various categories of the young child deserving urgent attention because of consistently poor performance in terms of development indicators, social marginalisation and invisibility.

ⁱⁱ Indicators of Infant Mortality Rate, stunting and net primary school attendance rate were used to construct YCOL over two time periods. YCEI used the indicators of poverty rate, immunisation coverage, female literacy rate, sex ratio and percentage of households with a protected water supply were used. The YCOL and YCEI consider the overall impact of various factors to arrive at the indexing scores in each, primarily with this understanding that these multiple factors influence each other and go on to influence the overall outcomes and enabling environments for the young child. For more, see Chapter 1: The Young Child in India, State of the Young Child in India, 2020, Mobile Creches. Also see, Annexure 2 of the SOYC Report that highlights the methodology and limitations of the indexing exercise owing to data gaps.